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# Assassination and Obsession

## *From Lincoln to JFK, the Murders on Our Minds*

By Michael R. Beschloss

DECADES AFTER the president's murder, someone advanced the theory that he was killed by conspirators in the U.S. military complex who were alarmed that their commander-in-chief was going soft on the adversary. The popular treatment of this notion became a national sensation. When journalists and academics denounced it, the author bitterly branded them tools of an Establishment coverup.

This refers not to Oliver Stone, but to a Chicago chemist-businessman named Otto Eisen-schiml, who in 1937 published a book called "Why Was Lincoln Murdered?" Chosen by the Book-of-the-Month Club, it argued that Secretary of War Edwin Stanton orchestrated Lincoln's murder in order to prolong the U.S. government's militance toward the defeated South and benefit Stanton's own constituency.

In the wake of John F. Kennedy's assassination, distraught Americans strained to find superficial similarities between the 35th president and the 16th (for example, each was

elected in the 61st year of his century, each fought for civil rights and was succeeded by a Southerner named Johnson). As with Lincoln, once the immediate trauma of Kennedy's death began to fade, a cottage industry sprang up, producing literally hundreds of mutually contradictory books lambasting the official version of the crime. It has come to seem that the most lasting parallel between the two leaders may turn out to be the degree to which their deaths continue to haunt the American imagination.

A historian would like to think that the continuing national obsession with the Kennedy assassination is an expression of healthy curiosity about lingering historical questions. But Americans do not seem to be quite so aroused about such less dramatic issues as why Harry Truman fired Douglas MacArthur or whether Dwight Eisenhower should have authorized the Interstate Highway System. Neither of these subjects would have caught the eye of Oliver Stone and his investors.

Why does the interest in Dallas remain so intense? One reason is trivial. Some Americans treat the subject as a parlor game, with the same curiosity that causes some people to steep themselves in the lore of such mysteries

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as the kidnaping of the Lindbergh baby or the disappearance of Amelia Earhart. For them, the Kennedy assassination seems to offer an Agatha Christie-like range of possible scenarios and culprits—the Mob, the CIA, the Pentagon, pro-Castro Cubans, anti-Castro Cubans, right-wing fanatics, the Soviets. It is safe to presume that the many tourists who visit the devoutly unofficial Assassination Information Center in Dallas (open 24 hours a day) with the Zapruder film of the crime played on conspiracy loops go there less for historical truth than dark entertainment.

**A** more profound reason runs back to Eisenstein. Many Americans remain obsessed with Lincoln's assassination because they view it as a decisive moment in American history. They believe that had Lincoln lived, the South might have been more graciously restored to the Union. For Eisenstein, Lincoln's death had to be the work of one angry Shakespearean actor and a few co-conspirators but a part so momentous that it had to be engineered by Lincoln's own war secretary.

Other conspiracy theorists have long pointed to the sudden death in 1850 of Zachary Taylor, after gorging himself on cucumbers, cherries and cold milk, and how momentous it had to be engineered by Taylor's efforts to relieve the harshness of the slavery issue and avert a Civil War. Could such a peculiar demise with such grand consequences be accidental? Last June, they succeeded in having Taylor's coffin pried open and his corpse examined for signs that he was poisoned by pro-slavery conspirators. (They found none.) Joseph Stain, another who doubted that history happens by accident, insisted that his World War II ally Franklin Roosevelt lived beyond 1945. The president would never have erupted, Stain was certain, that Roosevelt was persecuted by Soviet-hating members of his own administration.

Many Americans in 1952, perhaps a party, believed that Kennedy was another moment in our history from which we have never recovered. By this argument, the shock of the assassination, the frustration of the Kennedy promise, the accession of Lyndon Johnson, the large-scale plunge into Vietnam, the official de-

ceptions and ultimate U.S. military defeat all stripped Americans of their idealism and their confidence in national institutions. It is difficult to bear the thought that our lives could be so altered by the whim of fate. One need only read through Kennedy's FBI file (now in the FBI archives) to see how many groups issued threats against his life. Cubans angry at his efforts to unmask the CIA, Cuban exiles angry that the effort were not vigorous enough; guerrillas who resented their harassment by his forces; the Department, nubts of the radical right who complained to one another that he was handing the country to the pope, the blacks, the Jews and the communists. As we have learned since 1963, these groups, as well as the president, had the chances of a grand conspiracy behind Kennedy's murder to be under Johnson.

In November 1963, Americans were ignorant or dimly aware of political and social forces that were revealed and dramatized during the next three decades—the Mafia, the CIA, U.S. government lying and criminal conduct, the links between political money and military spending. So great was the shock that they had been taught what amounted to a child's history of America, many have reacted by presuming that there is a hidden or conspiratorial explanation for almost every historical event.

**T**his has increased their eagerness to find invisible currents behind the Kennedy assassination, especially because so many key elements of the Kennedy administration (as opposed to every conspirator, they found none) have been secret. The Truman or Eisenhower secretaries, the Trumans or Eisenhowers (they were secret in 1963 and only revealed later in *Deadline*)—the president's relations with Judith Campbell Exner and her ties to the Mafia; the plotting of the CIA and the Mob against Castro; Kennedy's secret arrangements with Khrushchev; the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and its secret dialogue with the Cuban dictator. So many boiling at the time of Dallas have made it all the more difficult to believe that the president was killed by a lone nut. Nevertheless, for all the evidence that there is a conspiracy, there is no explanation. Yet available that connects all the dots.



**W**as the Kennedy assassination an historical pivot-point? Was it the result of a vast conspiracy? Like Eisenstein with Lincoln, Oliver Stone throws ambiguity to the winds, answering both questions with an emphatic yes. His newly discussed "JFK" is a cartoon that robs the U.S. military and corporate establishment of the U.S. war for which, in Stone's view, it was panting and that its leaders killed him to prevent it.

The historical distortions begin even before the title appears on the screen. Stone opens his film with an excerpt from Elmer Gantry's famous 1961 farewell warning against the "acquisition of unwanted influence" by the "military-industrial complex." Although Stone would have us believe that Ike was preciently cautioning us against a Pentagon-led coup d'etat, he was actually warning Americans to resist the demands for a mammoth defense buildup made during the 1960 campaign by none other than John Kennedy.

Throughout the film, Stone harps on Kennedy's quarrels with the CIA and the Pentagon vastly inflating the importance of the 1963 memo ordering withdrawal of a thousand troops from Vietnam. He omits the ample evidence we have of Kennedy's insistence on preserving his anticommunist credentials, his belief that the communist tide had to be resisted in Southeast Asia and his own intentions in the fall of 1963 is ambiguous.

His partisans recall Kennedy saying that he would not mind being denounced as soft on communism in 1965 because by then he founded.

Similarly, Stone exaggerates the case that Kennedy might have been killed by a lone nut. Nevertheless, for all the evidence that there is a conspiracy, there is no explanation. Yet available that connects all the dots.

least as plausible to imagine him in 1965 worried that, forsaking the U.S. commitment to South Vietnam would jeopardize congressional willingness to pass his ambitious second-term domestic program, his

and the available evidence cannot. For all Stone's professions of high moral purpose and respect for the late president, the filmmaker has a curiously ghoulish sensibility.

The camera lingers on actual bootlegged photographs of Kennedy's autopsy. Stone's

special effects people have recreated the corpse so that it can be prodded onscreen in the same fashion as those Mexican tapetossing mangled bodies after automobile wrecks.

The film suggests that Stone and other

artists have forged a tacit

unwitting alliance with Kennedy's most zealous champions. The grizzled, obstinate

center to be named for him because his work and ideas lived on, which was not true

of the cool, dispassionate Kennedy, who so

distressed movements and ideology. Some

of Kennedy's partisans thus moved quickly

to see his death as the result of his ideals. It

was in this spirit that, immediately after the assassination, Jacqueline Kennedy said she

hoped that at least her husband had been killed for civil rights. Informed that the assassin was a "silly communist," she repelled meaning.

The conspiracy theorists have an equal stake in finding meaning in Kennedy's

death. Otherwise, they would have spent

much time and energy investigating a clue

that made little difference. Distorting the

evidence to make Kennedy a Grand

Saint, who would have kept Amer-

ica out of Vietnam and reduced the power

of the U.S. military-intelligence apparatus is

one remedy to this problem. It also gives

Stone and others who share his political

views a stick with which to beat the Pen-

tagon and the CIA.

There is every reason to keep examining

Kennedy's record as president and discover

new truths about his number, but not for

public titillation or pamphleteering. Historians and amateur students of history must remember that some historical issues are never answered beyond the shadow of a doubt. In no case might that prove more true than the question of why John Kennedy died and where this country would have headed had he lived.